

A Week-end with the Boston Symphony Orchestra
Introduction 2015 Gary D.
Gordon

In 1952, I was studying physics at Harvard University , near Boston, Mass. My parents were medical missionaries in Brazil, and I was encouraged to write them weekly letters (it took 2-4 weeks in transit). During the summer I was working at the Physics Laboratory, and my weekends were free. One weekend, a friend of mine and I drove to Tanglewood, MA, near Pittsfield in the west end of Massachusetts, to attend concerts by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Note that during World War II, hitch-hiking of soldiers and civilians had been encouraged, as a patriotic way of helping soldiers and saving gas.

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Dear Family,

These accounts of the week-ends are taking up most of my letters, but I don't want you to forget that between two week-ends there is a week, and I generally get a little work done in between. However you're probably more interested in the week-ends anyway.

This week-end I went to Tanglewood; I'd been wanting to go all summer, and this was the last concert, but it seemed hard to find anybody who wanted to go with me. By this Saturday, all I had was the fact that if Paul Fjelsted wanted to go, he was to call me. He finally did Saturday morning, and we decided to leave in an hour. He had sleeping bags, and he wanted to hitch-hike out. I was willing to go along with him, as it was cheaper, and might be more fun. I left my car at his place, we took the bus out of Boston, and started hitchhiking.

We started off about eleven, and by one o'clock we had gotten two short rides as far as Framingham - and there we were stuck until four, with cars whizzing by all the time, and no rides. We soon learned that this week-end travel is very different from the cars during the week. At that rate we could see we'd never get to

Tanglewood for the Saturday evening concert. So we gave up our hitchhiking expedition in defeat, took the bus back to Cambridge and drove out in Mimi [my car]. Of course after that set-back we vowed we'd pick up every hitch-hiker we could; we did pretty well, giving rides to eleven people during the whole trip.

So, we finally made our second start from Cambridge at 4:45, and really headed for Tanglewood. I didn't drive too fast, but kept the pressure up all the way. The best route is down through Springfield, and up to Lenox over Jacob's Ladder. I know that route pretty well, traffic wasn't too bad, and we arrived at Tanglewood by 9:00. The concert, we found out, was scheduled for 8:15, but we still arrived before intermission, which was pretty nice.

I wish I could really give you a feeling for the concert itself; at one time there I was thinking of everything I was going to write about, but now I've forgotten half of it. The concert is given in a huge shed, more or less like a trapezoid, with the three large sides open, and the fourth being the background for the stage. The latter is quite simple, with no curtain, but just a good acoustical background. Inside the shed there are seats, selling for different prices, while outside are those like us who only pay \$2 to get in. We weren't quite as close to the orchestra, but I think we enjoyed it just as much.

We spread out a blanket on the lawn, lay down, and really had a grand time. We could see the stars overhead, and I also saw a firefly high overhead, which seemed like a star that was first here and then there. With thousands of people around, it was still quiet enough to hear the music with a clarity that radios and phonographs still don't seem to duplicate. I was impressed by the versatility of an orchestra, and how many different combinations of sounds can be made.

The actual pieces that were played didn't seem to be important to me, as I was interested more in the general effect than in the actual notes, and didn't try to analyze it or learn it. However, in case you're interested, the Boston Symphony Orchestra played

Copland's Symphony No. 3 and Sibelius' Symphony No. 5; we missed only Bach's Concerto in D Major for strings.

At intermission time, after taking a careful bearing on where our blanket was, we walked around a bit. In order to see as much as possible, we decided to walk as far front as we could; somewhat to my surprise we got all the way to the front without being stopped, although at some place I guess we did pass some line we shouldn't have. Near the front we saw some chairs roped off in little squares like boxes, and that's where the real society sat. The type of dress they wore was quite different from the dungarees which many girls had out on the lawn. We even were able to secure a couple of programs for the bourgeoisie, a thirty page booklet very different from the leaflet handed out on the lawn. At the end of intermission we stepped out to one side, intending to watch the orchestra get started, then go back to our blanket. All plans may go astray, and we found our way barred by an iron fence; we were out where the limousines were parked, and where the chauffeurs were standing listening to the concert. Finally we had to go practically around the whole thing, with an usher lifting up a rope for us to get back to our usual place. During intermission I saw a lot of people, but nobody I knew; however, there were probably some there.

After the concert Paul and I decided to avoid the traffic rush, so we stayed on the blanket a while, then wandered all over the grounds. There's one formal garden which is quite nice, although not much compared to Brazilian ones. We also found out about the chamber music which was to be played the following morning. When we finally got back to our car, we weren't bothered by the traffic.

We had our sleeping bags, so our only problem was to find where to put them. We found the smallest road on the map, and took that, and found an even smaller road turning off from that. It finally turned into a dirt road, and as soon as we saw a turn off into the woods, we went down that fifty feet, and stopped. Only a couple of

cars went by the dirt road that night, and they didn't even see us, so you can see we had quite a nice place. The sleeping bags were very comfortable, and after listening to the news on the radio, we went to sleep. About three or four in the morning we were awakened by rain, however the sleeping bags were waterproof, and we just covered our faces and went back to sleep. Our clothes and stuff (those that weren't in the car) were in a waterproof bag, but we forgot to turn a rip to the underside so we had a few damp things in the morning. It would have been wonderful sleeping out if it hadn't rained; as it was, it wasn't bad at all, and much better than trying to find a room, for I heard places were jammed for miles around.

The next morning we had breakfast at a Howard Johnson's; very good pancakes, but very slow service. We then drove to Tanglewood, and got our tickets for the morning chamber music. The latter is open only to the Friends of the Berkshire Music Center, so we became members of the organization by making a voluntary contribution. It was held in a closed hall, and was given by students, so the attendance was quite a bit less. In fact when it started there were less than a hundred there, although soon the hall filled up to its five hundred or so capacity. First we had an instrumental octet, with an oboe carrying the melody, next a violin, cello, piano trio, and finally another octet, this time with a flute predominating. The performers were terrific although some of the selections were a little too modern to enjoy the first time. All in all, it was very enjoyable, and quite different from the regular concerts.

We got out about 11:30, and listened to a sermon over the car radio. He was a very good preacher, telling what was wrong with present day religion, and rather different than most, he said the preachers should take some of the blame.

We then drove up to Pittsfield, about ten miles drive, and found a place for dinner. We really took our time finding it, and found a wonderful spot. The prices were very reasonable, the food was delicious, and the service excellent. The waitress would even come around and ask us if we had everything we wanted. Next we walked

around town a bit, and even into one of the catholic churches, which was quite beautiful. At the door we picked up one of the catholic magazines, which I have read since. It contains very well the catholic point of view, and I was especially interested in their opinion of the next election.

The rain put a stop to our walk, and after sitting in the car a little while, with radio and literature, we started back for Tanglewood. Then the rain really started to come down. Near Lenox we saw this elderly lady rather hesitatingly put up her thumb, so of course we stopped. She had started to walk it, thinking it would be a nice walk, but with the rain as it was, even her umbrella wasn't enough. She started to ask us where we were going, and then added - well, there's only one place to go, naturally. Shortly afterwards we picked up two gentlemen who were thumbing, and immediately another lady came up asking if there was room for her. So we filled up our car and proceeded to the concert.

Arriving there, I drove up to the main gate before going to a parking place, in order to let them out. Just as I was driving away, I heard someone calling me, and there was Seth Bridge (a friend of the family) . He was there with his mother and Miss Bridge, and so we made arrangements to sit with them. Then we drove way to the end of the parking lot, right near the exit, so we could get away quickly.

Due to the rain, the audience at the afternoon concert was quite a bit smaller, although of course there were still a few thousand. They had moved the benches in a little farther, so there was room for everyone under the shed. It wasn't as soft as the lawn to sit on, but quite a bit drier. Seth and I talked a lot before the concert began, for I don't think I'd seen him since he left for Brazil, and that was quite a while ago. Then the concert started and we listened.

The concert consisted just of Berlioz's Requiem, given by a chorus and orchestra. I'm afraid I'm a little critical of choruses, and thought the 100 voices just weren't quite enough; Berlioz himself said it would be nice to have 800, if I remember reading the program

correctly. Out where we were, at the back of the shed, the voices blended beautifully with the orchestra, and I just think there's nothing quite like the combination. Either one alone just doesn't seem to equal half of the combined effect. It was wonderful!

After the concert we scrambled, and were able to get out before the roads jammed up. There's only a two lane highway going by Tanglewood, and it sure can get jammed up. However, we were in front of the rush; and all we saw were policemen, at every intersection, waving us on. Instead of going back the way we came, we chose a different route, and had a wonderful time. We came back by a northern route, which goes near the top of Massachusetts; Route 2 most of the way, if you have a map. The part from Pittsfield to Route 2 I'd never been on before, so it was quite enjoyable. It was mostly these small roads (even dirt for a couple of miles) winding through the Berkshires, and although we didn't see any grand views, the scenery was wonderful. We got the pretty part mostly in daylight, which was quite nice. For supper we stopped at one place, got an order of chicken in a basket, which we ate on the way - good. Then we stopped a little later and had some ice-cream, etc. All these little stops made the driving a lot more enjoyable.

We did some singing on the way home, and what is even more interesting, we did some ballad singing; at least that's what I call it. As I understand it, the ballad singers of old, made up their own verses as they went along, and that's exactly what we did. We picked some tune we knew, and then made up words as we went along, first one and then the other. Some of the verses were terrible, but some of them were surprisingly good; wish I could give you a sample, but I'm afraid those verses are lost to posterity. The tune which worked out the best, and which we had the most fun with, was "Viva la compani", probably because that's the way it was intended to be sung. The chorus gives you just the right amount of time to think up another verse, and it works out quite well. The toughest thing is to make the lines rhyme, but we accomplished this quite a lot of the time.

Arrived home about nine thirty, having taken an hour longer coming back than going, and enjoying it a lot more. Paul took the bus back to Boston, and we both concluded we'd just have to do it again next year.

The week-end sort of overshadows last Friday's activities, when I also had a lot of fun. The seminar group met for dinner, then planned to go to the baseball game; however it was raining, so we went to the movies instead. Saw "Secret Weapon" and "Laughter in Paradise", both good movies, although not terrific. The first is quite scientific, so I enjoyed it quite a bit; the second is quite humorous. The company was wonderful; I should write more, but it's getting late.

From the Berkshires, Gary